

Date: Thu, 19 Apr 2001 10:40:23 -0700  
Subject: Re: Your edits and comments on the Science response  
Sender: scott@cmgm.stanford.edu  
To: pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu  
From: scott@cmgm.stanford.edu  
Cc: lead@publiclibraryofscience.org

Hi Pat and Mike-

I agree with Mike that pressure needs to be kept on. The question is how to do it. We have set a "sundown" date, in essence, of Sept. 1. I think that some of the journals and publishers are just waiting to see what happens then. If submissions continue to flow to them, they will merrily go along and our impact will lessen--not increase or even stay the same. The questions are: what will happen this fall, and how can we keep the pressure on? How many people at Berkeley are planning on never submitting to *Nature* again? The bulls have scared the arrogant matadors right out of the ring (they're now perched on top of brick walls) and much of the crowd has cheered. Now we need the crowd to pull the matadors off the walls and take the walls down; we don't need the bulls to run into the walls. Overall I think it's amazing and outrageous that people are arguing against a public archive, but we must find tactics that allow people to continue to support the initiative. I think we're getting closer, but many more journals must be properly viewed as legit before there will be a substantial move of submissions away from the bad guys. There are a lot of journals out there, and many of them are under the control of Academic and Elsevier, who have done nothing. Mike, your note reminded me of "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington"-Mr. Smith won, in the end, and I think Mike will too. There's been no question the publishers are in it for money. Lots of money. So are some scientists. That's not going to change and we need to continue pushing back at them. I could hear your frustration in your note. I'm looking forward to the full report-thanks from all of us for taking the time for a tiring trip.

A few other comments below.

Best,

Matt

Hi Matt,

I wonder about a couple of your points:

First - it doesn't seem to me that we've alienated many potential allies with the "boycott" - the people who were alienated are generally people who were not likely to be real allies anyway. In fact, most of the people who've told me that they were offended by this are people with direct and close ties to journals and publishers - eg., journal editors, or semipermanent staff of scientific societies. And they are offended and alienated only because they are so accustomed to being able to dictate the terms of the journals' relationship with scientists unilaterally that it seems threatening and rude when uppity scientists exercise their power as players in the free market. Kind of like the benevolent plantation owners being offended by slaves demanding their rights ("after all we've done for them- giving them a roof over their heads, clothes to wear, food to eat...").

I think you may be underestimating how people feel about this, but nobody has more than anecdotal data. I have certainly gotten a number of strong responses from colleagues who did not sign the letter and described it as a "bluff" and etc., and these were people with no association with those vested interests which, I agree, are unsurprisingly the most outspoken and outrageous. Some people have legitimate concerns that by going along with the boycott (no quotation marks are necessary; it is that), they will hurt not themselves (secure, established, etc) but their postdocs and students. This concern will change as more journals become "good" options, but we're talking about just a few months away.

Second - If we just sit around and wait for the existing journals to sign on, then we'll leave our supporters with no choice but to jump ship. So we need to turn our energies immediately to creating or throwing our support to alternative journals so that there will be enough real options for our supporters that the free market can take its natural course, and force the non-compliant journals to change or go under.

Well, this I strongly agree with. I'm less sure how in practice to go about forming new journals. We're all pretty busy. I think the gradual but very encouraging moves toward PMC are critically important to solve part of the problem. As you say, people need choices.

The physics model (authors post their own work at an online archive prior to formal publication) was closer to what I wanted to set up two years ago with the ebiomed proposal, but that we so threatening to the powers that be that it was impractical to set it up with any NIH support. Many people felt it was a threat to peer review, and an even bigger threat to the existing journals. The current PMC system was designed as a tactical step towards a more innovative model - avoiding the controversy over peer review and focusing on freer access as a first step. In fact, it is still a long term goal of PMC to establish a site for author submitted work to be posted prior to peer review, but this is on hold until the public library function is better established, and people can get comfortable with it.

Sounds good.

Two years or more ago, I was seriously planning to set up an arXiv like system on a server here at Stanford, but after a meeting with David Lipman, Paul Ginsparg (the guy who started the physics ArXiv), and a bunch of people who are now in our "lead" group, I was persuaded that doing it through NCBI was a better way to get it launched quickly and more "professionally" - this eventually led to the rather emasculated version that is PubMedCentral. It may very well be time to return to the grassroots ArXiv model - all the more so now that this initiative has gotten people thinking more broadly about scientific publication, so that we could realistically hope that many people would post their work at such a site.

I think that PLOS has done a magnificent job of getting people to think about the issue more deeply, and I strongly agree with Mike's point from last night about the fact that nothing much would be happening without PLOS having gotten things going. The useful debate going on at the *Nature* website is a good example of what never would have happened (of course *Nature* has done nothing itself). If ASM, after their rather nasty letter to us, signs on to PMC that would be quite a victory.

But none of this provides a lever to get the publishers to relinquish their monopoly control over their archives, and, let's face it, we will either need to get some serious money to pay the ransom to the publishers, or we will need coercion - a way to make their financial viability dependent on giving the archives they are holding hostage back to the public.

Pat

I think that's true. Our only power is in those 15000 people, and we must give them some way to exert the power that does not have implicit in it major perceived or real sacrifices for them. This is what I've been trying to think about and I'd like to hear from everyone. Right now they are having an effect without having made any sacrifice; can we help them do more of that?